

Georgia Charter Schools Commission

Summary of Findings and Recommendation

New Commission Charter Application for the Georgia Cyber Academy

Proposed School: Georgia Cyber Academy

Georgia Cyber Academy is currently in operation as the K-9 virtual school program of the bricks-and-mortar Odyssey School, working in conjunction as a State Charter Special School. Georgia Cyber Academy and Odyssey School have decided to split into separate entities, with Georgia Cyber Academy proposing to serve 8,500 students in grades K-10 in their first year of operation, eventually expanding to 16,500 students in grades K-12.

Location: Virtual

Attendance Zone: Statewide

Interview Panel: Ben Scafidi, Laura Lashley, Kathleen Mathers

Interview Date: November 2, 2010

Recommendation: Approve Commission Charter

Background

In 2008, the General Assembly passed HB 881, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission Act, which creates a seven-member state level commission that has the power to authorize charter schools even if local districts deny the petitions. Members have been appointed by the State Board from a slate recommended by the Governor (6 recommendations for 3 positions), Lieutenant Governor, (4 recommendations for 2 positions), and Speaker of the House (4 recommendations for 2 positions). Under the statute, the State Board of Education retains the power to overturn the decisions of the Commission, provided that 2/3 of the State Board votes within 60 days of the Commission decision. If the State Board does not act within 60 days, the decision of the Commission is final. After the approval of any schools at the December 16, 2010 meeting, the State Board will consider those petitions formally at the regularly scheduled February 2010 meeting.

Twenty-three applications have been submitted to the Commission for opening or transition to Commission authorization by the fall of 2011. Of those initial 23 petitions, two were denied Commission interviews due to lack of legal and procedural compliance, and four petitions were voluntarily withdrawn from consideration in the 2010 petition review process. Two petitions were deferred consideration to allow further development by their sponsors. Accordingly, the Commission acted on the remaining 15 petition applications on December 16, 2010.

The recommendation process sought to identify the highest quality applications to be considered for approval by the Commission by focusing on the caliber of the academic plans, business plans, and overall capacity presented by the applicant groups. The recommendation contained in this memorandum was prepared after all eligible petition applicants were separately interviewed by a panel comprised of Commission staff, a member of the Commission, and a third party education expert. Before each applicant interview, representatives from any potentially affected districts were afforded an opportunity to present their concerns regarding the petition to the interview panel. Following the interviews, Commission staff provided the petition applicants with the Commission's Supplemental Information Policy that allows the submission of any information specifically requested by the panel during the interview under established guidelines. The recommendation included herein is a result of information gathered during this process:

1. A review of the petition by Commission staff
2. An interview with up to five representatives for the petition, two of which must be current board members
3. Supplemental information specifically requested by the interview panel to clarify concerns or questions raised during the interview process

Recommendation and Summary of Findings

I. Recommendation

The recommendation is to approve a charter for the Georgia Cyber Academy.

II. Summary of Findings

A. Academics (Educational Plan)

Georgia Cyber Academy (“GCA”) proposes a comprehensive K-12 virtual school program with an emphasis on standards-based instruction and core academics. Courses offered in grades 9-12 offer subjects in different levels such as Core, Comprehensive, Honors, and, when available, Advanced Placement (“AP”) to customize student education and provide differentiation opportunities. GCA also offers a wide selection of electives and world languages for students to choose from, ranging from computer programming to oceanography.

The interview panel was impressed with the academic program’s flexibility which allows students to take courses at different grade levels throughout an academic year at their own speed. Such flexibility allows each student to receive an education customized for his or her particular skill levels in each area. The interview panel was also pleased to see the high academic performance of the GCA in spite of the lower funding levels associated with State Charter Special School status. While GCA has encountered difficulties in the past regarding its academic performance, the governing board and the school administration have since confronted those issues and implemented effective solutions as evidenced by their ongoing success. For example, GCA students averaged more than one year of grade level growth in Math and Reading in all grades. Furthermore, demand for enrollment continues to rise, indicating the popularity and success of the school’s virtual program.

B. Budget (Financial Plan)

The interview panel was pleased by the demonstrated support and demand for GCA as these are important factors in determining a school’s ability to thrive financially. GCA’s waitlist for enrollment which consistently numbers in the thousands illustrates the demand for their services and the good reputation they are building

among Georgia families seeking alternative educational opportunities for their students. Furthermore, the submitted budget was thorough, prepared carefully with the new funding assumptions for virtual schools, and indicative of a fiscally responsible school program.

C. Capacity (Organizational Plan)

As it currently operates, GCA is the virtual K-9 component to the Odyssey School, a bricks-and-mortar State Charter Special School. GCA is managed by K12, Inc. During the petition review process, it became apparent to both the Commission staff and the interview panel that the schools are operated almost entirely independently of each other. Furthermore, K12, Inc. and a separate petitioning group also submitted a petition to the Commission for a Georgia Cyber Academy High School (serving grades 9-12). In light of this situation, the interview panel raised concerns with the petitioning groups of both the Odyssey School and the Georgia Cyber Academy High School regarding the current and proposed configurations and requested that the petitioning groups provide supplemental information regarding any future plans for reconfiguration.

After deliberation by the separate petitioning groups and K12, Inc., the groups came to a consensus to separate the Odyssey School from the Georgia Cyber Academy (K-9) and consolidate the virtual programs into one Georgia Cyber Academy serving grades K-12. The parties to the original operating agreement between the Odyssey School and K12, Inc. formed an amicable arrangement to separate without any adverse consequences to either party. Both the Commission staff and the interview panel are pleased that the petitioning groups were able to come to an agreement that has resulted in a logical configuration that will provide optimal educational opportunities to Georgia students.

The interview panel was impressed by the diligence shown by the Georgia Cyber Academy High School's governing board in adapting the original petition to include the addition of the GCA K-9 program. Additionally, the interview panel is confident in the governing board's ability to run a successful school as it is equipped with qualified individuals with a broad array of skill sets and backgrounds, and is also welcoming some of the GCA parents who served as directors on the original governing board to join the new consolidated board to offer their expertise and experience.

For all of the preceding reasons, the interview panel recommends that the Georgia Cyber Academy be granted a charter by the Commission.